

Rules of the Game

Ranged Attacks (Part Three)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we examined thrown weapons. This week, we'll look at **projectile weapons**.

Using Projectile Weapons

You hold a projectile weapon in your hands and use it to propel a missile that travels to your target. In general, projectile weapons have much bigger **range increments** than **thrown weapons**, and their maximum range is 10 range increments rather than 5. Check your projectile weapon's description for exceptions, however.

Projectile weapons use ammunition, which must be the correct kind for the weapon. For example, a bow fires arrows, a crossbow fires bolts, and a sling fires stones or bullets.

Drawing ammunition is a **free action** -- but you might need to use a **standard** or **full-round action** to load it into your projectile weapon. If your projectile weapon doesn't require an **action** to reload, you can make iterative attacks with it if you use the full attack action and your **base attack bonus** is high enough to allow more than one attack. Of course, you also must have enough ammunition on hand to make all those attacks.

Ammunition usually breaks when you fire it. As a general rule, ammunition breaks or otherwise becomes unusable if your attack hits your target (even if the target's **hardness** or **damage reduction** negates all the **damage** the missile deals). If your attack misses, there's a 50% chance that the piece of ammunition you used remains unbroken and suitable for use. You still must spend some time picking up the fired ammunition, however. Exceptions are possible, so check your weapon's description to make sure the general rule applies.

From page 221 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*:

Ranged Weapons and Ammunition: The enhancement bonus from a ranged weapon does not stack with the enhancement bonus from ammunition. Only the higher of the two enhancement bonuses applies.

Ammunition fired from a projectile weapon with an enhancement bonus of +1 or higher is treated as a magic weapon for the purpose of overcoming damage reduction. For example, a sling stone hurled from a +1 *sling* is treated as a magic weapon. Similarly, ammunition fired from a projectile weapon with an alignment (such as a +1 *holy longbow* or a masterwork crossbow under the effect of the *align weapon* spell) gains the alignment of that projectile weapon (in addition to any alignment it may already have). For example, a +1 *unholy arrow* fired from a +2 *anarchic shortbow* would be both evil-aligned and chaos-aligned (the former from its own unholy special ability, the latter from the shortbow).

If your projectile weapon is magical, it usually imbues its magical properties to any ammunition it fires. For example, arrows fired from a +1 *shortbow* are treated as magical weapons for purposes of overcoming damage reduction. An aligned projectile weapon confers its **alignment** property on ammunition fired from it. Likewise, a projectile weapon with some special magical property, such as a flaming weapon or a thundering weapon, usually confers those properties on ammunition fired from it. Check the property's description to be sure.

When a projectile weapon confers its magical properties on its ammunition, the effect lasts only for an instant -- as long as it takes to resolve the ranged attack. Even if the ammunition isn't destroyed in the attack, the property fades away immediately afterward. You or another character cannot pick up the ammunition and get the benefit of the magical property for another attack.

Your **Dexterity** modifier applies to ranged attacks you make with a projectile weapon. Your **Strength** modifier does not apply to the damage you deal with the weapon unless the weapon's description says otherwise. Quite a few projectile weapons use your Strength modifier, so it always pays to check the weapon description.

Some Selected Projectile Weapons

Here are a few projectile weapons worth discussing, either because they're a little strange or just because doing so will allow us to explore a few key issues more fully.

Arrows: You can fire an arrow from a bow or composite bow, long or short. You cannot fire an arrow from any kind of crossbow.

You can stab with an arrow in melee, but you can't throw it. An arrow used as a melee weapon is treated as a light improvised weapon (-4 **penalty** on **attack rolls**) and deals **damage** as a dagger of its size (1d4 for a **Medium** character). You threaten a **critical hit** on an attack roll of 20 and the critical multiplier is x2.

Bolts: You can fire a bolt from a hand, light, or heavy crossbow, repeating or not. You cannot fire a bolt from a bow. You can use a bolt as a melee weapon just as you can with an arrow.

Bows: All bows require two hands to use; you hold the bow in one hand and draw back the bowstring with the other. A bow does not require an action to load, so you can make iterative attacks with the full attack action if your base attack bonus allows.

You can fire a short bow almost anywhere. A longbow, however, is too big to use when mounted.

When you use a normal bow (that is not a composite bow), you don't gain a Strength bonus to damage when an arrow you fire with the bow hits. If you have a Strength penalty, however, that penalty applies to the damage you deal with arrows you fire from the bow. Essentially, your low Strength keeps you from drawing the bow properly and that affects your damage.

A composite bow, long or short, can be made with extra stiffness so that it can deliver arrows with more force. A composite bow allows you to use some or all of your Strength bonus to damage with arrows you fire from the bow; see page 119 in the *Player's Handbook* for details.

A bow isn't suitable for melee combat, but you can use it as improvised weapon (use damage numbers for the club). You take a -4 penalty on your attack roll.

Crossbows: Crossbows, except hand crossbows, require two hands to use. If a crossbow is already loaded, you can fire it one-handed at a penalty as noted in the weapon description.

A hand or light crossbow requires a move action to reload, so you cannot make iterative attacks with these weapons. The Rapid Reload feat allows you to reload a hand or light crossbow as a free action, which allows you to make iterative attacks if your base attack bonus allows.

A heavy crossbow requires a full-round action to reload, so you usually can fire it only once every 2 rounds. If you have the Rapid Reload feat, you can reload a heavy crossbow as a move action.

Even with the Rapid Reload feat, loading a crossbow (even a hand crossbow) provokes an **attack of opportunity**.

A repeating crossbow includes a magazine loaded with five bolts that drop down into firing position, one at a time, when you work the loading lever. Cocking a repeating crossbow requires two hands and is a free action. This allows you to make iterative attacks with the crossbow if you have a sufficiently high base attack bonus and if there are sufficient bolts in the magazine. Loading a new magazine into a repeating crossbow is a full-round action that provokes an attack of opportunity. It takes two hands to load a new magazine.

You can whack a foe with a crossbow, but you use it as an improvised weapon if you do (use damage numbers for the club). You take a -4 penalty on your attack roll.

What's Next?

We're out of time for this week. Next week, we'll consider shooting into melee and other topics related to ranged combat.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.